

The Artist Who Is Bringing Icebergs to Paris

By [Cynthia Zarin](#) December 5, 2015

"A circle is like a compass. It leaves navigation to the people who are inside it," Eliasson explains. "It is a mistake to think that the work of art is the circle of ice—it is the space it invents." Photograph by Eric Feferberg / AFP / Getty

On a clear day with little wind, in early October, a tugboat set out from the harbor of Nuuk, in southern Greenland, in search of a dozen icebergs for an installation in Paris called "Ice Watch," by [the Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson](#) and the geologist Minik Rosing. The installation, a circle of icebergs with a circumference of twenty metres, is installed at the Place du Panthéon during this week's Climate Change Conference. The captain of the tugboat was Kuupik Kleist, the former Prime Minister of Greenland, an affable man in his late fifties who was born and raised north of Nuuk. "Ninety per cent of our country is covered by ice," Kleist says. "It is a great part of our national identity. We follow the international discussion, of course, but to every Greenlander, just by looking out the window at home, it is obvious that something dramatic is happening."

The idea of "Ice Watch" is twofold: the ice is arranged like a watch, or a clock face, to indicate the passing of time; and, in real time, observers will be able to watch the ice

melt. Eliasson explains, "A circle is like a compass. It leaves navigation to the people who are inside it. It is a mistake to think that the work of art is the circle of ice—it is the space it invents. And it is on a street in Paris—and a street in Paris can't be more important than it is right now. We all feel that strongly."

In Greenland, sailing out in the Davis Strait, past Nuuk Harbor, trawling slowly, the ice Kleist was looking for wasn't just any kind of ice but icebergs made of compressed snow—snow that has fallen for tens of thousands of years—which have broken off from the glacier, in a process called "calving." "We can only take what nature gives us," Eliasson says. "For Paris, the ice gave us big chunks!" The largest chunks of ice displayed in Paris are just short of ten tons, which is about the size of three New York City cabs piled on top of each other. Minik Rosing, whose work on photosynthesis in the Greenland sea beds reset the date for the beginning of life on Earth, from 2.8 billion years ago to 3.7 billion, explains, "Inside the iceberg, you see snow layers in sequence as you go back in time. Because it is compressed, the air between the snowflakes that fell thousands of years ago is trapped in tiny bubbles."

Once Kleist and his crew lassoed the ice calves, they were dragged back into the harbor, lifted up by heavy cranes, stored in icehouses, and then transferred by container ship to Denmark before a ten-hour trip, in a truck, to Paris. (The longest trucks are the cheapest, Eliasson notes; the

project was underwritten by Bloomberg Philanthropies, which also funded Eliasson's 2008 New York waterfall project.) Ice, like glass, is both hard and fragile. Kleist laughs, "We had to be very, very careful. We didn't want to open the container in Denmark and find a thousand ice cubes!"

Eliasson was waiting in Copenhagen. "I thought, I know what ice looks like—I've seen ice frequently, these days! But when I opened the truck, it was shivering and shining in the warm air of Copenhagen. The ice had gotten a shock! I put my hand to it and suddenly I drew my hand back! I said to myself, The ice is really cold! Cold ice on your hand is very different than reading about how it is melting." He paused. "From the perspective of the ice, humans look really warm."

Some of the questions that are preoccupying Eliasson in his work these days include: What is the relationship between data and cognition? How is data translated into doing? Thinking into feeling? Are we more likely to act on knowledge or emotion? Timothy Morton, a British philosopher whom Eliasson calls "our new Arctic friend," has been part of the ongoing conversations Eliasson likes to have around his art installations. Morton writes an extremely popular [blog](#), and is the author of several books, among them the forthcoming "Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Further Coexistence." (He's also collaborated with the Icelandic singer Björk.) Morton is a proponent of Object Oriented Ontology (O.O.O.), which suggests that,

in order to realign our relationship with the planet, we must think of a plurality of perspectives. "In our contemporary ecological emergency, there's a lot of data, but at this point we're dumping ecological data on ourselves. It's not helping. We don't need to be doing that for one more minute. Olafur is putting pieces of ice there and saying, 'Let's try to start a conversation.' "

"Ice Watch" was first mounted in Copenhagen last year, outside the Town Hall, while the I.C.C.P. climate report was being written, in what Eliasson calls "a trial run." François Zimeray, the French Ambassador to Denmark, encouraged Eliasson to bring it to Paris. There was no question, according to Zimeray, of the exhibit being cancelled after the attacks there in November. "On the contrary! The vocation of Paris is cultural life and the exchange of ideas. It is so important now to show that life is alive in the streets, in the very *center* of Paris!"

Eliasson and his wife, the art historian Marianne Keogh, have two young children, Zakarias and Alma, who were both adopted from an orphanage in Ethiopia. I asked how having children had changed the orientation of his work. "You know, my kids are more elaborately agile in the digital mode than I am. My generation experienced a time of innocence, but children now have never known a time without the challenge of climate change. I try to ask my children not what nature *looks* like; they know what everything *looks* like—atrocities in Paris, in Syria, everywhere. But they don't know what it *feels* like. Public

space in which things happen is vitally important now, and especially in Paris, where space is generated by civic consciousness."

He asked me to hold on; he needed to wake Alma from a nap. When he returned, he said, "We are bringing ice to Paris two weeks after the attacks. The values I hold were attacked. My first thought was to respond to the authorities and be attuned to the sorrow. 'Come,' they said. The earth is a public space, the space is my host—I am putting ice in the palm of Paris."

The exhibition opened last week, and will be up for two weeks. At the Place du Pantheon, if a passerby puts her ear to the ice, she will be able to hear a little moment of *pop* and *crack*. What is released is the cleanest possible air. It is fifteen thousand years old. Eliasson says, "It is a little pop that has travelled fifteen thousand years to meet you in Paris, and tell the story of climate change."